

Family Structure, Relationship Transitions, and the Risk of Child Abuse/Neglect

William Schneider
Columbia University
ws2305@columbia.edu

Abstract

This paper examines the association between family structure and relationship transitions and the risk of child abuse and neglect. The analyses draw on the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth cohort of low-income, mostly unmarried, children and families. I investigate whether family structure and relationship transitions over the first 9 years of a child's life are associated with harsh parenting or neglect by both mothers and fathers, and CPS involvement. First, I draw on three measures of harsh parenting: the frequency and severity of corporal punishment, and physical and psychological aggression. Next, I estimate the association between both family structure and relationship transitions and four measures of neglect: supervisory, medical, physical, and psychological. Last, I analyze mothers' involvement with Child Protective Services. Preliminary results suggest that both the nature and number of relationship transitions play a role in child maltreatment while stability in relationships of all kinds may be protective.

The past 50 years have seen dramatic changes in the structure and role of the American family. Stark increases in divorce, cohabitation, nonmarital child bearing, and multiple-partner fertility have contributed to increased instability experienced by children in regards to living arrangements, parenting quality, and social support. A substantial literature has demonstrated the ways in which divorce and remarriage make children more vulnerable to poor social and developmental outcomes (Cherlin, 2009; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Similarly, A large body of evidence demonstrates that children in non-married families are more likely to experience behavioral problems than children living in two-parent married families (McLanahan & Sandefeur, 1994). Children brought up in single parent homes face the greatest levels of risk for poor outcomes (Fomby & Cherlin 2007; Hofferth & Anderson 2003). A smaller literature has investigated the potential impact of relationship transitions and family complexity (Tach, 2011) on child wellbeing and has largely found that these transitions are associated with increased stress and harsh parenting (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

A number of theories have sought to explain the pathways through which child maltreatment occurs. Early research focused almost exclusively on the ways in which individual psychopathology related to child abuse and neglect (Gil, 1971). Belsky (1980 & 1993) and Garbarino (1977) expanded beyond this, employing an ecological framework to explain the multiple interacting levels of individual, family, and community factors that contribute to abuse and neglect. Other theories have focused on the role of the family interactions, economic hardship, stress, or on the nature of traditional gender roles (Elder, 1974; Guterman & Lee, 2005). An additional strand of research that is both rooted within, and separate from the above theories, has focused on the role of family structure.

Policy and research on child maltreatment has historically viewed children living with unmarried mothers as being at risk for child maltreatment. Prior research has demonstrated that father absence

is associated with less access to financial resources, more parenting stress and less warm and supportive mother-child interactions, which in turn increases the likelihood of child abuse and neglect (Lee, Gershoff, & Altschul, 2013).

Other research has drawn on social-biological theory to demonstrate the risks associated with the presence of men (step-fathers and boyfriends) who are not biologically related to the mother's children (Daly & Wilson, 1996). These men, it is argued, are less likely to invest in children who are not biologically related to them and more likely to neglect and maltreat them than a biological, resident father.

Research has also shown, however, that biological fathers presence – particularly cohabiting or non-resident fathers – is associated with increased risk for maltreatment. Prior research has found that paternal job loss or economic hardship is associated with physical abuse as fathers seek to reassert their authority in the household (Straus, 1974). Additionally, it may be that the stress associated with financial hardship erodes parental relationships and increases parent's harsh and punitive parenting practices (Gershoff, 2002; McLoyd, 1990).

Although some prior research has investigated the role of family structure in child maltreatment and Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement, little work has examined the nuances of relationships beyond traditional designations of married and single (see Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009; and Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009 for notable exceptions). In this study, I examine the associations between different complex family structures and relationship transitions and the frequency and severity of harsh parenting, neglect, and CPS involvement over the first 9 years of children's lives.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) is particularly well suited for examining the association between family structure and relationship transitions and the risk for child maltreatment. The study contains extensive information on maternal and paternal relationships

starting at the time of birth of the focal child through the first 9 years. In addition, FFCWS has a number of measures of harsh parenting as reported by mothers and fathers about themselves and each other, as well as by home visiting interviewers, and the children. The study asks a number of questions about supervisory, medical, physical, and psychological neglect. Mothers also reported on their involvement with CPS. The study also asks a number of questions about individual psychopathology which might contribute to maltreatment. Many prior studies of CPS involvement have used convenience surveys of families already involved with CPS. FFCWS is unique in that it is a prospective longitudinal study that contains a group of families who happened to become involved with CPS.

I begin by dividing both mothers and fathers into 3 groups of time invariant family structures: 1) always married to child's biological father; 2) always cohabiting with child's biological father; 3) always single. Next, I create 2 categories of time-varying relationship transitions: 1) parents who were married or cohabiting at baseline and who exited their relationship and entered into – and/or exited - romantic or residential relationships with the biological or a social father/mother (between waves 1 and 5); 2) parents who were single at baseline and entered into – and/or exited – married or cohabiting relationships with the biological or social father/mother (between waves 1 and 5). In addition, I create indicators of the number of transitions that each parent experienced.

Using a series of OLS and logistic regression models I estimate the association between (1) time invariant family structure and harsh parenting, neglect, and CPS involvement, (2) the association between different types of family structure transitions and harsh parenting, neglect, and CPS involvement, and (3) the number of family structure transition and harsh parenting, neglect, and CPS involvement. Next, I ask whether male children or racial/ethnic minority families were more likely to experience harsh parenting, neglect, or CPS involvement. Importantly, I estimate both the frequency and severity of harsh parenting in each model. In all analyses I progressively include

individual measures of psychopathology related to child abuse and neglect, such as depression, drug and alcohol use, and impulsivity, as well as maternal and paternal socio-demographic characteristics, child problem behaviors, and city-fixed effects. Preliminary results suggest that both the nature and number of relationship transitions play an important role in child maltreatment while stability in relationships of all kinds may be preventative.